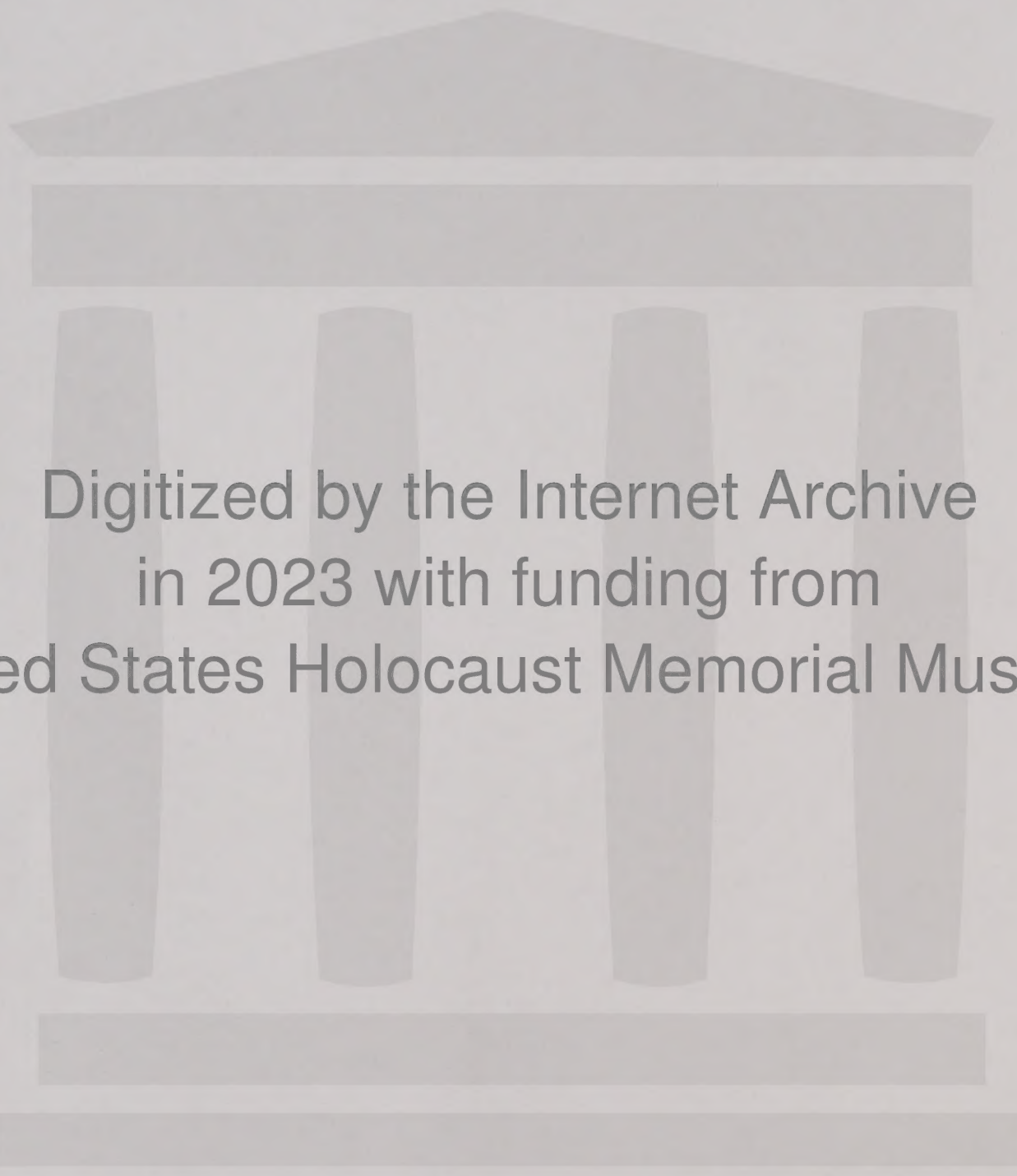




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Flirting With Death

She was determined to have her way with him. To charm him into giving her what she wanted. Then to get out fast. It was a risky plan.

Prague, March 23, 1939. One week after Hitler's army had invaded the capital of Czechoslovakia, unopposed. Jewish families were desperate to flee to safety. One such group depended on my mother.

She hatched a plan to get their exit visas. My father, Oskar shuddered, refused to listen. He had always been relied upon to make decisions, or to lighten situations with humor. Not this time. She maintained that hers was the only way it could be done, because nobody was allowed to leave the country without a permit.

My mother was and is a remarkable woman, always ready to try something new. She is attractive and loving. Sometimes strong, controlling and competitive, often naive, flighty and funny. In the theatre of life, she plays front-stage-center.

Her anticipated adventure could result in only two possible outcomes: success or deportation and death -- for her and, probably, for the whole family. She says, she never even considered the latter. She alone could and would procure the necessary exit signatures in their passports from the Gestapo.

She now says that she was unafraid, thought of it as a bit of a lark. "I was young and didn't really know how serious this could be," she remembers. She never adds that she was a very lovely young woman, who charmed men easily.

They all met at a restaurant on Optelova Street, just west of Wenceslas Square, across from the former palatial Petschek Bank building. The Gestapo had expropriated it for their headquarters. Mother doesn't remember how many people were there. About eight to twelve, she guesses. Certainly, her sister Herta, brother-in-law Ernst, her brother's wife Hanna and a few friends. My beloved grandparents were at home with me. They had no passports, which were absolutely crucial to obtaining the visas.

My aunt Herta started to tell Mother's story this way:

"Nelly's hazel eyes glittered, wide with anticipation. She gave off an air of excitement, tinged with danger. I've seen my sister walk into trouble before, but never like this. She tried to reassure everybody that she would be just fine, and would soon return with the coveted papers.

"She collected all our passports and tucked them into her purse. Oskar and I still tried to stop her. To no avail. She waved to us and kicked back one foot for good luck. Then she walked purposefully, with head held high, across the street. I couldn't believe it. I was sure I would never see her again.

"She disappeared, dwarfed by the huge, ornate, wooden door, which led into the den of the dreaded Gestapo. The climate of the quiet group in the cafe almost reached the cracking point. I tried not to cry. Oskar walked up and down, up and down, he was terrified that she was flirting with death, would be apprehended, dragged away, even killed. We all wondered how this beautiful young Jewish woman could possibly escape the Nazis' clutches. They could do anything they wanted with her. Oskar couldn't stop his pacing. He was trembling all over. The other men tried to make the situation look as normal as possible. They ordered coffee, we forced ourselves, and him to sip and talk quietly. The excruciating wait began."

That morning, before she left for the restaurant, I had watched as Mother dressed extra carefully. She put on a rust-colored suit, with a beige blouse. It was cinched by a patent leather belt which matched her mahogany shoes, purse and gloves. A hat with a ribbon of the same colors, and a tiny veil over her eyes, sat, at a rakish angle on her head. She complemented the whole, with a single strand of pearls and one-pearl earrings. I thought she was the loveliest woman in the world.

Mother continued her tale:

"Inside the old, stately building, I was stopped by two armed guards. I informed them that I had an appointment with the *Oberleutenant*, the chief officer. They led me up the wide, curved stairway. Did I feel small or frightened in this grandiose place? No. I did not. One soldier opened a door at the head of the stairs

and announced me. I was ushered into a cavernous room. He disappeared, the door closed.

"I faced a tall window, under which stood an enormous, well-polished desk with a few papers and a phone on it. Behind it, stood a high-back chair and beside that loomed an outsized swastika flag. I stood my ground. As I entered, a smartly uniformed, bemedalled man rose, towered over me and saluted. He settled a monocle in his right eye. There was a moment of silence. We assessed each other. He motioned me to a chair. We both sat down. As I introduced myself in impeccable German, his glass dropped from his eye. He had apparently expected unintelligible Czech.

" *'Also, wie kann ich dieser eleganten Dame helfen?'* -- So, how can I help this elegant lady? -- I inclined my head, accepting the compliment and came to the point.

" *'Ich brauche ausgang Erlaubnisse nach England für meine Familie. Ich habe die Pässe mitgebracht für Ihre Unterschrift.'* --I need exit permits for England. I have brought the passports for your signature. -- He interrupted me.

" *'Aber, bitte nicht so schnell. Erstens müssen Sie mir etwas versprechen'* -- Please not so fast. First you must promise me something. -- I never faltered. And refused to feel any fear.

" *'Was möchten Sie denn?'*

" *'Ich kenne Ihre schöne Stadt überhaupt nicht. Wenn ich die Pässe unterschreibe, möchte ich dass Sie mir die alte Hauptstadt zeigen. Ist das ein Vertrag?'* -- I don't know your beautiful city. After I sign the papers, I want you to show me the old city.-- Is that a deal?

" *'Das kann ich machen. Aber erst muss ich die Pässe meiner Familie zurück geben. Ich rufe Sie in ein par Tagen an, und wir arrangieren uns zu treffen.'* -- That I can do. But first I must return the passports to my family. I will call you in a few days and we'll arrange to meet.--

" *'Das passt mir gut. Geben Sie mir die Pässe.'* -- that suits me. Give me the passports.-- As I gave them to him, he raised his eyebrows. *'So viele? Sind das alle Ihre Verwandte?'*-- So many? Are they all your relatives?-- He replaced his monocle as he looked first at the pile of booklets, then back at me.

